

EAST PALESTINE TRAIN DERAILMENT

Madam President, on another matter, the attention and prayers of the entire Nation have been fixed for the past several weeks on the town of East Palestine and the surrounding area in Northeast Ohio. The derailment of the Norfolk Southern train led to a disastrous chemical release, forcing many from their homes and leaving a community vulnerable. The people of East Palestine are understandably anxious and upset, and of course they deserve answers.

Our colleague the junior Senator from Ohio has been all over this issue. We will continue to work with him to ensure the people of Ohio are appropriately informed and supported in the months to come. We also thank Ohio Governor Mike DeWine for his leadership on the ground.

Unfortunately, this leadership has cut a sharp contrast with the Biden administration's Secretary of Transportation. Even amidst a catalog of crises on his watch, from this and other recent train derailments to the meltdown in air travel back during the holiday season, Secretary Buttigieg has seemed more interested in pursuing press coverage for woke initiatives and climate nonsense than in attending to the basic elements of his day job.

Understandably, there were some initial concerns in my home State of Kentucky about possible impacts since we are downriver, but the good news is that even after careful monitoring by local experts, there is no reason to believe that Kentuckians have anything to worry about. Local water authorities are monitoring the Ohio River's downstream water quality very closely, and thus far they have seen no cause for alarm whatsoever. Every indication is that the situation for Kentuckians is 100 percent normal. Even so, my staff and I remain in close communication with all the relevant utilities and local authorities.

INFLATION

Madam President, now on one final matter, January was the 21st month in a row with year-on-year inflation of at least 5 percent. The U.S. economy has seen prices rising at an annual rate of 5 percent or more every single month following President Biden's first 100 days. Democrats' reckless spending has made soaring costs a fixture of everyday life for families all across our country. Real-wage declines have become a tragic reality for workers in every single State.

Last week, new data proved yet again that persistent inflation has become actually embedded in our economy. One key measure of consumer behavior, the personal consumption expenditure index, grew at triple the monthly rate from December and at its fastest pace since June of last year. Inflation in the services sector in particular is 5.7 percent higher than it was a year ago.

The Democrats' inflation is not just driving up the prices for groceries and

essentials that families pay themselves at the checkout counter; it is also baked into the costs families pay indirectly through service providers, from plumbers to contractors to medical providers and beyond. In every corner of the economy, workers and businesses are still having to hunker down against the ongoing consequences of Democrats' reckless mistakes.

What an odd time, then, for the Biden administration to declare victory over a problem it helped actually create. The White House Press Secretary declared earlier this month that "the President's economic plan is indeed working." Well, today, 57 percent of Americans say they have less money in their pocket than they did a year ago. Nearly two-thirds say they are living paycheck to paycheck. The White House calls this mission accomplished. The American people call it a nightmare for 2 years and counting.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The majority leader is recognized.

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Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, first responders at the State, local, and Federal level continue working around-the-clock helping the people of East Palestine recover from one of the worst train derailments in decades.

The scene in East Palestine over the last month has been the stuff of nightmares: a 38-car derailment; an entire town forced to evacuate; the stench of industrial chemicals and soot hovering in the air; parents scared of their kids' drinking water; and kids anxious about life returning to normal. No community deserves this.

While a full investigation of the derailment has yet to be completed, the Chair of the National Transportation Safety Board said this accident was "100 percent preventable." Again, the NTSB Safety Board Chair said the accident was "100 percent preventable."

The fault of this disaster lies first and foremost with Norfolk Southern. Norfolk Southern's CEO, Alan Shaw, needs to come before the Senate, answer questions under oath, and explain to the American people exactly what went wrong and how they will prevent accidents like this from happening. He should not duck. He should be there. He should come before the Senate, and we are asking Mr. Shaw to do just that.

The American people should hear from Norfolk Southern's CEO precisely why they thought it was a good idea to spend years—years—lobbying to loosen regulations designed to prevent accidents like this. And I especially want to hear why Norfolk Southern, after

seeing a record \$3.3 billion in profits last year, prioritized billions—billions—in stock buybacks instead of putting that money toward safety and toward their workers.

Over the past few weeks, there has been no shortage of opportunists racing to blame the administration for the train derailment. Former President Trump himself showed up in East Palestine and blamed everyone but himself for the tragic accident. But President Trump, as usual, omits a crucial truth: The Trump administration spent years working to loosen safety regulations intended to make these types of accidents less likely.

They are in the behest of the big rail companies. When President Trump entered office, rail companies spent millions to push for repeals on all sorts of safety regulations, from inspection requirements, mandates for newer brakes, and rules governing the number of employees required to operate a train. In one instance, the Trump administration repealed requirements for an electronic braking system because, according to them, the safety benefits were simply not worth the costs.

Let me say that again.

In 2017, the Trump administration decided to repeal the requirements for brake upgrades because they didn't think the safety benefits were worth the cost. I think the people of East Palestine now know that that analysis was wrong and that they are suffering the consequences of rail companies putting profits over people.

Now, I want to be clear: A full investigation is still needed to determine which, if any, safety regulations might have prevented the accident in East Palestine, but you don't need to be an expert to see that, when companies prioritize profits over safety—when they loosen safety rules, lay off thousands of workers, and spend more money on stock buybacks than on preventing accidents—you are flirting with disaster.

It is so typical of Donald Trump. He does the bidding of corporate special interests and it leads to serious harm to the American people. And when he gets caught, he turns around and blames someone else. It just doesn't wash, and the American people see through it. Disasters like the one in East Palestine are precisely what can happen when safety takes a backseat to maximizing profits and when self-aggrandizing politicians like Donald Trump allow and encourage it to happen.

I particularly want to thank my colleagues from Ohio and Pennsylvania for being vigilant in responding to this disaster and working in a bipartisan way to solve it.

I also, of course, want to thank all of the first responders at every level of government for working without rest to keep people safe.

The Senate is going to look into precisely what went wrong in East Palestine. A good first step will be in hearing directly from Norfolk Southern's